

## **Philadelphia Dance Connections**

### **By Dianne McIntyre March, 2010**

I first witnessed Philadelphia Dance Company in the early or mid-1970's when our family reunion was held in Philly. It's called the Dykes-Lightfoot Family Reunion and we rotate cities where different family members live. So we were having the banquet in a large ballroom of the hotel and these beautiful dancers came out in the middle of the open space (I think in the round) and performed for us. So elegant, dynamic, crisp, totally professional! The choreography was inventive and fresh. They were young people – maybe older teens. I was so impressed. Who are these people? I was already living in NYC – maybe I'd been there three years and had just started my company Sounds in Motion. I did not meet Joan then, however one of my cousins told me that was the Philadelphia Dance Company.

Sometime after that – late seventies or early 1980, I just seemed to know Joan from “around” – at meetings, concerts, conferences – just from our world of Black folks in dance. I can't remember ever meeting her – just knowing her. I realized that the elegance I saw in the dancers was directly from Joan's person. Elegant with grit – that's her. And that's the company as I see it. One time in 1982 I appeared on the same concert with Philadanco. It was called Dance Black America. I performed a solo all in silence (that previously in previous concerts had been extremely well received). However on this occasion at BAM, I was on the program following Joan's Philadanco who had just brought the house down – these young dynamic dancers took New York by storm that night. The audience was still buzzing from watching them when the lights came up for my piece and I actually never captured the audience. Later backstage I remember Joan saying to me, “My goodness – where do you get all that energy? It's great!” That was special and really lifted my spirits.

Of course, I have been watching Philadanco over the years, admiring their work and the power of the dancers. In 1996, Kim Bears and I were featured on a special event at American Dance Festival. Both Pearl Primus and Helen Tamiris were receiving the Scripps Award posthumously. Kim performed a solo of Pearl Primus (that had been in Philadanco rep) and I performed Tamiris' “Negro Spirituals”. Tamiris and Primus had a connection in life (Pearl Primus performed in a Broadway show of Tamiris and she told me how they both liked each other so much – I think because neither of them would take any “stuff” from people and everyone knew that about them). That night when Kim and I performed it was explosively powerfully, as if the spirits of those two artists were reunited. We felt it. Everybody felt it. I remember Joan saying to us (dryly) afterwards something like: “You two were just performing brilliantly and now you're walking like you're crippled. Huh!” (For translation, if crippled is not politically correct, do change it – thanks).

I was quite honored that Joan became a central force for me when I was choreographing a segment of “Beloved”. It might have been a stretch for her because she had mentioned to me earlier that her “people” (board and followers) do not like dances with references to anything reminiscent of slavery times. In this instance I needed 150 people – 50 men, 50 women, 50 children. Joan sent so many people – former dancers, present dancers, future dancers plus their friends and relatives of those folks to be part of the piece. We had other people there as well, including dancers I knew from New York –

however the core and strength came from Joan Myers Brown people. They were so giving, supportive, patient and offering time energy and creative with a lot of love. That was one of the most special projects I've even done. I had a ball. One moment that I'll always remember was with Beah Richards. In a rehearsal I explained to everyone, including the children that they would be in the presence of royalty with Beah Richards. She is a royal being for us as a people and in the world of the arts. The day of the shoot, when Beah Richards came into the clearing with her nurse and sat down a hush fell on that big group. I greeted her. Then in a wave much of the group, led by the men, came to touch the ground at her feet. Though Joan was not able to be there that day – she was present in the people who surrounded Beah Richards. Joan had a lot to do with how they were. At one point during the shoot the director, Jonathan Demme asked me, "How did you locate these people? They look so beautiful and so "present" in every way." I asked for a thank you in the credits for Philadanco and was very happy the producers agreed to that.

(At this year's IABD some dancers greeted me who had been in "Beloved" and said they are thrilled that they still get residual checks. Made me feel good.)

A few years ago Joan called me in the fall (maybe 2004) and said they had received a grant for me to do something on the company – right away. I was very busy at the time, hadn't created space for time to think about this or for choreographing and so I didn't know what to do. She said it could be a piece previously choreographed. Sometimes I have a challenge choreographing my older works on a company, because so much of the work was done with live music and the companies are usually not prepared for live music. The only thing I could think of was a women's trio from 1986 called "Sigh of the Rock" – all recorded music. It's rock and roll music (or R&B) performed by Black artists that later were performed by White artists. Myself and two dancers from Sounds in Motion had performed it. Well, that work for Philadanco was not successful (That's why you never heard about it).

Though the dancers were well-rehearsed and they put their whole hearts into it, I did not have the time to pull the stylistic nuances, belligerence and rawness out of them. Looking back, I would have done better to do a new piece on the full company. Something just for them and from them. I hope to do that in the future.

In the meantime, I have been invited to do a piece for Eleone next season. They received a major grant from Pew for me to come and do that. We are all excited about that. I love the company's energy. The artistic directors came to Cleveland in January to see a new work I created for a company based in Cleveland. Also next season in Philadelphia I will be the consultant on a performance piece with Germaine Ingram about the President's House (this is a Pew grant, too). So, as you can see I'll be busy and spending a lot of time in Philadelphia in the coming season. I look forward to it.